Yannick Laurent
Spiti: The Gigantic Valley of Many-Hued Strata; Archaeological and Historical Research in the Western Himalayas

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While there is a substantial and growing literature on religion, political history, art, architecture, and social life in Western Tibet—comprising the Ngari Prefecture of the Tibetan Autonomous Region in China and the ancient kingdom of Ladakh (now a Union Territory in India)—scholars have paid less attention to other adjacent Himalayan regions situated to the south and west of Ladakh, such as Lahaul, Kinnaur, and Spiti in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.

The present work is an immensely important contribution to the study of Spiti, one of the many former Himalayan polities strung out along the Tibetan border, including Ladakh, Zanskar, and the kingdoms of Sikkim in India and Lo Monthang (Mustang) in Nepal. As the author points out, the study of Spiti has generally been neglected, having too often been "pushed into the background as part of Ladakhi history" (53). Yannick Laurent has spent much time in Spiti as a researcher focusing on archaeology, social history, and art history, with the present volume (an enlarged version of his doctoral thesis from the University of Oxford) being the most significant result of his research so far. It consists of two volumes, the first being a historical study of Spiti, the second a significant collection of relevant illustrations of architecture and art history, as well as of legal documents.

Spiti, a part of the Tibetan Empire until the latter's fragmentation in the ninth century, adopted Buddhism in its Tibetan form in the eleventh century. The only historical site in Spiti that has received in-depth attention until now is the Buddhist monastery of Tabo, which was likely founded at the end of the tenth century. Tabo is famous for its exquisite mural paintings, which are remarkably well preserved and have been extensively studied by scholars (see Klimburg-Salter 1997). Laurent, however, focuses on the much less explored settlement of Dangkhar, which has, as he points out, "never received more than cursory references in secondary literature" (175). The following overview of the contents of the two volumes shows the range of topics dealt with in these volumes. Chapter 1 of volume 1 contains a brief introduction to the location of Spiti, the role of Buddhism—about which the author remarks that "The history of Buddhism in Spiti is not well-understood beyond generalities concerning the religious activities carried out by the great translator Rin-chen bzang-po (958–1055) under the aegis of the Western Tibetan royalty" (21)—the etymology and history of the place name of Spiti, and the Spiti language, a dialect of Tibetan. Chapter 2 provides an extensive survey of the reports and publications, including visual documentation, from Spiti produced by Western, mainly British travelers. Chapter 3, "Researching the History of the Spiti Valley," discusses the contribution of various scholars with a carefully argued and useful periodization of its past and an overview of the fluctuating territorial organization of Spiti over the centuries until the end of the British colonial period in 1947.

This is followed by a detailed description of the territorial organization of Dangkhar (chapter 4), including the geological setting and toponymy of the valley, roads, boundaries, fields, and the all-important water resources, as well as fortification works. Chapter 5, "Residential Area and Social Structures," deals with local taxation systems

and social stratification, whereas chapter 6, "The District Fort and the Local Government of Spiti," is a study of the most prominent edifice at Dangkhar, a fort or castle situated strategically on a cliff above the settlement, probably dating from the sixteenth century, although earlier structures on the site might be as early as from the eleventh century. This chapter also discusses the relations between the local leaders of the Dangkhar valley and the traditional ruling elite of Spiti and is rounded off by a study of the two territorial deities of the fort.

Below the fort is a monastery, in historical sources referred to as Lagope (the meaning of which is unclear) monastery, now known as Dangkhar Tashi Chöling, to which chapter 7, "The Monastery of 'Lagope,'" is dedicated. In the seventeenth century, the Lhasa-based Tibetan state conquered Western Tibet, with the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism becoming dominant in Spiti as well, although it remained a semi-independent polity until the nineteenth century when it was incorporated into British India. Lagope monastery has adhered to the Gelugpa school since 1618 (117), although other schools of Tibetan Buddhism were not entirely eclipsed and are still to be found in Spiti. The chapter discusses, among other topics, the name and foundation narratives of the monastery, its architectural development—possibly dating to the mid-fifteenth century (111)—and its mural paintings and their iconographic programs. This chapter also contains a study of the abbatial lineage of the monastery, as well as its administration and estates, the latter topic being dealt with in considerable detail. The final chapter, chapter 8, again focuses on the history of Spiti, especially its relationship to the economically and militarily far more powerful kingdom of Ladakh as well as to the Tibetan government based in Lhasa. Spiti's importance was due to its straddling one of the trade routes between Tibet and India; consequently, Ladakh, whose wealth was based on the same trade routes, was generally the dominating power among its neighbors. With Ladakh becoming part of British India in the nineteenth century, Spiti also came under (largely nominal) British administration.

In the context of Laurent's otherwise excellent historical overview, one may be permitted to question the assertion that the Zhangzhung kingdom, of which Spiti probably was a part, and which was conquered and assimilated into the Tibetan Empire in the seventh century, "has generally been associated with pre-Buddhist beliefs, and notably for its sponsorship of Bön" (144). Although this association is asserted by many writers, it is, in fact, not documented until after the demise of the Tibetan Empire and the emergence of a coherent system of ritual and belief known as Bön (more precisely, Yungdrung Bön, "Eternal Bön") in the ninth and tenth centuries. Thus, by the time Bön emerged, there was no longer a Zhangzhung kingdom to sponsor it.

Volume 2 contains a rich and varied visual documentation organized in a series of appendices, of which the following are of particular importance. Appendix 2, "Maps and Architectural Documentation," opens with a collection of maps dating from 1841 up to the present, as well as schematic drawings, cross sections, and storey plans of the monastic buildings. This is followed by color photos and detailed iconographic inventories of the interior walls of the Upper Temple of the monastery. Appendix 3 contains material from various visual archives, the oldest being based on drawings of Dangkhar made in the 1820s (although only published in 1841). There is also a collection of unique photographic material of architectural and ethnographic interest, going back to 1863 and the following decades. Appendix 4, "Visual Documentation," spans a variety of material, ranging from rock inscriptions to detailed photos of various ancient

remains at Dangkhar dating from 1863 as well as, for the sake of comparison, from recent years; there are also numerous photos of fragmentary murals from monastic buildings at Dangkhar. An important body of relevant epigraphic material is found in Appendix 5, "Epigraphic Documentation and Donor Prefaces," including material originating from Tabo monastery and the village of Kyi. Appendix 6, "Legal and Diplomatic Archives from Dangkhar," continues the presentation of written sources in the form of twenty-six documents, the majority of which have been photographed in Spiti by the author. The texts included in these two appendices are presented in facsimile, transliteration, and annotated translation. As these documents make use of a technical legal terminology, Laurent has provided readers with a unique and accessible study tool in English, as only a few other scholars have previously published similar legal documents in Tibetan from the Himalayan region and translated them into English (see Ramble 2008), relevant research having hitherto largely been published in German.

Spiti: The Gigantic Valley of Many-Hued Strata is an important book from several perspectives. It is based on extensive and original archaeological and ethnographic research of this region of the Western Himalayas. At the same time, it provides a very clear overview of the cultural and political history of this former semi-autonomous polity and suggests a highly useful periodization of its history. A particularly commendable approach adopted by Laurent is the combination of archaeological, philological, and social data, making the presentation of architecture and other aspects of material culture meaningful for social scientists and historians of religions also. The two volumes fill a major gap in research on Spiti and the Western Himalayas, and one must hope that it will inspire other scholars to proceed along similar lines.

References

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